

Chicago Tribune, July 27, 2005

The Navy's final plan for Ft. Sheridan will free up about 45 acres for private development, protect pristine bluffs and replace hundreds of dilapidated housing units for military families, U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk said Tuesday.

Also under the plan, 38 acres at the former Glenview Naval Air Station will be turned over to private development, though there are no indications of who will get the land or how it might be developed--with homes, businesses or left open.

The plan calls for area communities to get tax revenue from Navy housing for the first time. But officials in Highland Park say the planned 284 new homes will increase the pupil population and cost local schools at least \$2 million more per year than they receive in new taxes.

Districts 112 and 113 estimate the number of pupils would rise from 152 to 402 even though there would be 45 fewer homes because many of the old ones are unoccupied and the new ones will have more bedrooms, Highland Park Mayor Michael Belsky said. To educate each child costs between \$11,000 and \$16,000, he said.

"As much as we want to see improved housing for the military, as an elected official how can you see that kind of impact?" Belsky said. "If we have to increase class sizes and reduce services, that's going to hurt everyone, including the military families."

Kirk (R-Ill.) said he has worked with the Navy to try to ease the blow to schools. Under the military's recent public-private partnership initiatives, the federal government retains land for housing but allows developers to build the houses and lease them back.

That makes the houses taxable, and the Highwood-Highland Park area will receive about \$1 million a year from Ft. Sheridan property, Kirk said, some of which will go to schools. In addition, he said, he is trying to introduce legislation in Congress that would increase the amount of

so-called federal impact aid to school districts that educate military children.

"We knew going into this that we couldn't get everything, but we substantially improved what was initially proposed," Kirk said, referring to the number of houses. He said he would meet next week with Belsky.

Construction on the new homes, which will be single-family houses and duplexes, could begin next spring, said Mike Defferding, executive vice president of Forest City Enterprises, which developed the plans.

They will replace dozens of decades-old 8- to 10-unit apartment buildings, some of which are uninhabitable, with bad roofs, cracked sidewalks and missing siding.

"It's really quite embarrassing that that's the best you can offer to families of servicemen that are being deployed routinely overseas," Defferding said.

Kirk said one of the key benefits of the latest plan is the preservation of the bluffs, which will be turned over to a private conservation trust.

"This was a unique opportunity to inherit bluffs that are almost untouched and leave them in a natural state," he said. "I want kids in the area to see a Lake Michigan bluff the way Pere Marquette would have seen it."

It is unclear when or how the 45 acres not needed for housing--34 earmarked for Highland Park and the rest for Highwood--will be developed. The Navy has not said when or to whom it will sell the land, some of which overlooks the lake.

Regardless of its seemingly prime location, the land will not mean a property tax windfall for Highland Park, Belsky said.

"We believe it will [only] support itself, so we don't see that as offsetting" the tax shortfall from the Navy housing, he said. Part of the land abuts a landfill, and another part has a ravine running through it, leaving about 20 acres of developable land, he said.

Meanwhile, officials in Glenview praised the Navy's plan for housing at the former naval air station. Originally, the Navy planned to increase the number of homes from 400 to 416 and retain all of its 93 acres.

After Kirk intervened, the project was scaled back to 250 units on 55 acres, with the other 38 acres to be used in some combination of open space and development.

"We're very pleased with the way it turned out," Glenview Village President Kerry Cummings said Tuesday. "This is a real success for us to achieve a balanced development."

While Glenview and Highland Park have worked to reduce the amount of military housing, North Chicago has the opposite problem.

The Navy has decided to replace the 2,014 units there with 966 new ones, which could endanger the \$5,000 to \$6,000 per-pupil impact aid North Chicago schools receive.

"I'm hoping they still come up a little bit so it doesn't negatively affect North Chicago," Mayor Leon Rockingham said.